

# RESPONDING TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE



*When a child tells an adult that he or she has been sexually abused, the adult may feel uncomfortable and may not know what to say or do. The following guidelines are for responding to children who have been sexually abused:*

## What to Say

- If a child even hints in a vague way that sexual abuse has occurred, encourage him or her to talk freely. Avoid judgmental comments.
- Show that you understand and take seriously what the child is saying.

***Child and adolescent psychiatrists have found that children who are listened to and understood fare much better than those who are not.***

- The response to the disclosure of sexual abuse is critical to the child's ability to resolve the trauma of sexual abuse.
- Assure the child that he or she did the right thing in telling. A child who is close to the abuser may feel guilty about revealing the secret. The child may feel frightened if the abuser has threatened to harm the child or other family members as punishment for telling the secret.
- Tell the child that he or she is not to blame for the sexual abuse. Most children, in attempting to make sense out of the abuse, will believe that somehow they caused it or may even view it as a form of punishment for imagined or real wrongdoings.

- Finally, offer the child protection and promise that you will promptly take steps to see that the abuse stops.

***Make realistic promises about protection depending on your role and ability to help.***

## What to Do

**Report any concern for child abuse.** If the abuse is within the family report it to the local Child Protective Agency. If the abuse is outside of the family, report it to the police. Individuals reporting in good faith are immune from prosecution. The agency receiving the report will assess risk, conduct an evaluation and take action to protect the child.


***Child Protective Services Hotline:  
1 866-End-Harm***

Parents should consult with their pediatrician or family physician, who may refer them to a physician specializing in evaluating and treating sexual abuse. The examining doctor will evaluate the child's condition and treat any physical problem related to the abuse, gather evidence to help protect the child, and reassure the child that he or she is all right.

It is often also helpful for the child visit a counselor to find out how the sexual abuse has affected him or her, and to determine whether ongoing professional help is necessary for the child to deal with the trauma of the abuse. The child and adolescent therapist can also provide support to other family members who may be upset by the abuse.

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## OUR MISSION

Children's Response Center provides comprehensive and culturally sensitive direct services to children and non-offending family members affected by sexual assault and other traumatic events. The Center offers prevention and education services to the community that promote social change focusing on the end to sexual violence. 

*Not every child needs therapy in order to heal and resume a normal life. However, it can be helpful for both the child and the parent to talk to someone about the abuse.*

While most allegations of sexual abuse made by children are true, some false accusations may arise in custody disputes and in other situations. Occasionally, the court will ask the child and adolescent therapist to help determine whether the child is telling the truth, or whether it will hurt the child to speak in court about the abuse.

When a child is asked to testify, special considerations—such as videotaping, frequent breaks, exclusion of spectators and the option not to look at the accused—make the experience much less stressful.

Adults, because of their maturity and knowledge, are always the ones to blame when they abuse children. The abused children should never be blamed.

When a child tells someone about sexual abuse, a supportive, caring response is the first step towards getting help for the child, reestablishing his or her trust in adults.

For more information on how to respond to child sexual abuse disclosures, or other child sexual assault related information, please contact:

CHILDREN'S RESPONSE CENTER  
Overlake Hospital Medical Center  
1120 112th Avenue NE  
Suite 130, East Building  
Bellevue, Washington 98004

*Children's Response Center is managed by  
Harborview Medical Center.*

PLEASE CALL CHILDREN'S RESPONSE CENTER  
FOR MORE INFORMATION.

PHONE: 425.688.5130  
WEB: [www.ChildrensResponseCenter.org](http://www.ChildrensResponseCenter.org)

Adapted from the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry website (<http://www.psych.med.umich.edu>)